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29 OCTOBER, 2020



Normal Now!
Art and Dis/ability in a Digital World

Department of Culture and Aesthetics



Stockholm
University

Welcome to the international symposium Normal Now! Art and Dis/ability in a Digital World

Who counts as normal, and how can we ask this question so that the answers give us keys to a more inclusive society? Warmly welcome to discuss this topical question with internationally leading scholars and artists working on the theme of bodies, technologies and norms – a central theme in a digital world where images govern who is included and who is excluded. This symposium presents diverse challenges to the image of normality – the image that identifies us as normal or not – so that we may confront stereotypes about what we can do and be.

The impetus of the symposium is a commitment to a topic with pressing societal relevance: understanding and transforming the ways in which notions of normality emerge in our cultural expressions and experiences, at a time when diversity is increasingly at stake. Art mirrors and drives these processes, as it originates and circulates in a media landscape dependent on coded standards that pervade global infrastructures as well as our most intimate relations. For this reason, and many more, we need to consider the conditions and consequences of how we imagine the normal, how we give these imaginings power in the form of images – and how such images affect everyday activities and identities in the 21st century network society.

Anchored in a project on blind photographers, the symposium responds to this need by sharing new knowledge together with individuals who define a growing field and by making that knowledge available to a broad audience. The invited speakers form a cross-disciplinary practice and research front, situated predominately in the United Kingdom where the project partially takes place. With a range of perspectives and practices – including film, dance, comics, the art museum, textiles, performance and photography – they offer a unique opportunity to connect social, technical and bodily aspects of normality at the intersection where art meets science.

About the organiser

Vendela Grundell Gachoud's work as a researcher, teacher and artist focuses on photography with critical perspectives on seeing and being in a digital world. Driven by societal concerns about the integration of technics and aesthetics, she works in international interdisciplinary settings from her base at Stockholm University (PhD 2016). In addition to teaching in advanced education, presentations at conferences and workshops, and scholarly art collaborations, her work features in over thirty exhibitions and twenty publications since 1998 – following a transition from dance that informs an in-depth multisensory approach throughout her work.

Reducing Social Stigma of Blindness through Media

This paper outlines the dissemination of my project on blindness, stigma and media. The project consists of three feature documentaries portraying the everyday lives of blind artists (a painter, a musician and a writer), underpinned by publications about disability, media and stereotypes. The work aims to deconstruct stigma through raising awareness of existing stereotypes and providing examples of alternative representations through my own film practice. In addition, the films intend to raise the self-esteem of blind people through awareness of mediated stereotype threats, as well as to empower them to consider art practice as a vehicle for recreation or rehabilitation. The films have five target audiences with different sets of aims: visual impairment groups, clinical workers, researchers, media practitioners and the general public. Each screening is accompanied by audience surveys and focus group discussions. This paper analyses some of the preliminary audience research data and evaluates the established partnerships with organisations from different target audience groups, considering pathways for impact within the ingroup and the outgroup.

Catalin Brylla teaches and researches in the areas of film spectatorship, cognitive media theory, stereotypes, representation, disability and gender. His practice-led research aims for a pragmatic understanding of how audio-visual and narrative representation impacts on society's understanding of marginalised social groups.

Catalin Brylla

Lecturer in Film and TV,
Bournemouth University.



'Not Your Tick-box!' – Negotiating the Complex Intersections between Disability, Creativity and Academia

Dr Tanvir Bush will talk about her journey from documentary film-maker to sensory photographer, writer and now Research Fellow on the D4D Project (Disability and Community: Dis/enfranchisement, Dis/engagement, Dis/parity and Dissent www.d4d.org.uk). She will explore the impact that coping with a degenerative eye condition (R.P. -retinitis pigmentosa) has had on her creativity, political engagement and self-awareness. By examining some of the ableist tropes she has had to wean herself from and by finding how integral a supportive and activist disabled community can be, she hopes to open a discussion into ableism versus activism in the Academy and why, post Covid 19, we need a new paradigm for inclusive research.

Tanvir Bush is a photographer, filmmaker, novelist, researcher in creative writing. Associate Research Fellow, D4D. Founder and co-chair, Empathy and Writing Research Group; co-founder and co-chair, Disabled Staff Network and Disability Action Group, Bath Spa University. PhD in Creative Writing, Bath Spa University. Focus: visual impairment, disability, the impact of creative writing on well-being and resilience, empathy, accessibility.

Tanvir Bush

Photographer, filmmaker,
novelist, researcher in
creative writing,
Bath Spa University.





Tanvir Bush: Bubblehead (2007). Copyrights courtesy of the artist.

Why Do We Think That Visually Impaired Don't Want to Know About the Visual Arts?

In this presentation I (very briefly) discuss the findings from my 2017 book, *Blind Visitor Experiences at Art Museums*. In doing so, I address the question in the title of this presentation through the experiences of visitors with visual impairment at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and philosophies of exclusion. Through this process, I argue that there is an extra dimension to understanding the visual arts. This dimension can act as a bridge between the awareness of artworks through perception and an understanding of their contents beyond perceptual knowledge. This bridge between awareness and nonverbal knowledge is described as an ambience that is provided by the environment and context of knowing artworks. This ambience is felt in museums, galleries, and monuments and is made possible by the visitor's proximity to artworks.

In this presentation, I also argue that ambience is still there when individual perceptions of artworks are lessened or removed altogether by the impairment of museum visitors.

In the process of examining blindness in the museum, this presentation also questions the work of two traditional viewpoints on knowledge about visual art in the museum. The first viewpoint is given by the art historian Ernst Gombrich, who wrote on an educational understanding of art and the role of the museum. The second viewpoint is given by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who wrote on the role of art in the museum as a symbol of cultural distinction and artistic tastes.

Simon Hayhoe is a Reader in Education at the University of Bath, UK. He is also a Centre Associate in the Centre for the Philosophy of Natural and Social Science, London School of Economics, an Associate of the Scottish Sensory Centre, University of Edinburgh and Temporary Advisor to the World Health Organisation.

Simon Hayhoe

Reader in Education,
University of Bath.





Noemi Lakmaier: *Cherophobia* (2019). Photo: Doris Antony. Copyrights courtesy of the artist.

The Body in Relation

In her live art and performance practice Lakmaier uses her non-normative, disabled, queer, female body as both subject and material and inserts it into and juxtaposes it against other bodies, spaces and objects of the everyday, thus creating strange, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory situations.

She is also an experienced existential-phenomenological psychotherapist in private practice where she works with clients from all walks of life, all genders and sexual diversities. Her approach to psychotherapy is based in existential philosophy engaged with the question of what it means to be human.

Her artistic and therapeutic work, as well as her research aim to challenge the Cartesian mind-body divide, sees people of fully embodied beings always already in relation to each other and the world we find ourselves in.

In this presentation, Lakmaier will introduce her art practice through the lens of existential phenomenology with reference to the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger. She will show images of her work over the past 15 years and talk the audience through her thinking and its development. Like all her work, this presentation too will be an experiment and an exploration.

Noemi Lakmaier is an artist with a site-responsive, live and installation-based practice. MA, Winchester School of Art. Existential-phenomenological psychotherapist. Focus: the body, non-normativity, relations between the individual and its surroundings, identity, perception of self and other in contemporary society, gaze and voyeurism, everyday materials, psychological implications of power, control and insecurity, belonging and otherness.

Noemi Lakmaier

Artist with a site-responsive,
live and installation-based
practice. MA,
Winchester School of Art.



‘Learning Aesthetics from People who are Visually Impaired’ (LAPVI): Using Visual Research Methods to Better Understand the Language of Touch

Funded by a British Academy Small Research Grant I worked closely with My Sight Nottinghamshire (a regional charity in the UK) leading a project called ‘Learning Aesthetics from People who are Visually Impaired’ (LAPVI). The 24 month project started in October 2018 and took a sensory ethnographic approach, using a multi-method framework, which included filming sensory ethnographic interviews with people who are visually impaired (to discuss objects they particularly appreciated through touch), leading into sensory workshops with people who are visually impaired, with textile design students, and with non-design students to select, discuss, and then answer a basic questionnaire about which materials each participant considered ‘beautiful/appealing’ and/or ‘useful/purposeful’.

One area I would particularly like to discuss is the potential for further research using visual research methods working with people who are visually impaired. This perhaps sounds paradoxical in relation to visual impairment and blindness but I believe has significant potential through ‘embodied simulation’ (Gallese and Guerra, 2020), which is closely related to empathy, to provide greater insight into learning aesthetics from people who are visually impaired, including learning more about haptic criticism and tactile dialogue through what has been termed the ‘language of touch’ (Haug 2016; d’Eve and Kleege, 2018).

Kevin Hunt is a senior lecturer in Design Culture and PGR Tutor for the School of Art & Design, Nottingham Trent University. Focus: cross-sensory transfer between diverse media, sensory engagement within art and design, sensory ethnography and empathic design, alternate ways of seeing/sensing, creative mapping of the lived and material environment.

Kevin Hunt

Senior Lecturer in Design
Culture and PGR Tutor for the
School of Art & Design,
Nottingham Trent University.



Dance, Disability and Dichotomies of Normalisation: Candoco on ‘Strictly’

Dance artists with disabilities are frequently subject to media representations that transmit myriad ‘messages’ about the work that is being performed. Historic representations of performers with visible disabilities have tended to focus on the ‘freakery’ of difference, whereby disability is rendered spectacle and the subject of voyeurism. In this context, this presentation will focus on one particular event; UK dance company Candoco’s appearance on a televisual spectacle; *Strictly Come Dancing* on November 28 2018. It will explore how their appearance open questions about temporality, and specifically crip time (Kafer 2013), how disabled performers have been inserted into a predominantly non-disabled event, and how that event simultaneously reveals and masks the political, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of differing temporalities that shape disability performance. I explore how their performance is a reminder that diverse and atypical bodies should prevent us from essentialising particular ways of moving and being moved, thereby avoiding deterministic models of the body, both biological and social, which marginalise embodiments that are perceived as unpredictable and unbounded (Rice, 2014).

BBC Youtube link of ‘Candoco Strictly pros and Candoco Dance Company perform to ‘Life on Mars’’; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8LkktRbr_E (accessed 21/11/19).

Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, queer, crip*. Bloomington; Indiana University Press.
Rice, C., Chandler, E., Harrison, E., Liddiard, K. and Ferrari, M., (2015). ‘Project Re• Vision: Disability at the edges of representation’. *Disability & Society*, 30(4), pp.513-527.

Sarah Whatley is Professor of Dance and Director of the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University. Founding editor of the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*. PhD in Dance, University of Roehampton. Focus: dance analysis, disability and inclusive dance, dance and digital technologies, intangible cultural heritage, somatic dance practices and pedagogy.

Sarah Whatley

Professor of Dance and
Director of the Centre for
Dance Research,
Coventry University.



“Shapereader” and the Case for Tactile Comics

Shapereader was specifically designed for users with visual impairment in regards to the production and consumption of tactile comics. Its interface is built on an expanding repertoire of free floating tactile ideograms (tactigrams) intended to provide haptic translations for all the semantic features, the conceptual functions and attributes of a textual expression. Both theoretical and practice based, the different Shapereader works challenge able-body assumptions and exclusionary access within the visual predominance ethos of graphic literature and explore the conditions for synthesizing language through embodied notions of materiality and performativity. Shapereader situates touch in the general sensibility as a conduit for vibrant artistic exploration and demonstrates that comics can address a diverse readership. It is a speculative, trans-disciplinary project that promotes an embodied, non-retinal, narrative experience with an ongoing outreach plan that since 2015 in Helsinki, has been unfolding in a variety of formats, contexts and collaborations.

In the present paper, the focus is brought on Shapereader’s early implementation and the first systematic attempt to address the sense of touch in the production of comics. *Arctic Circle* is a tactile novel, presented as a museum installation including several work-specific communication boards designed both for sighted and visually impaired visitors. I will walk through some of the strategies used to translate concepts and elementary semantic features into haptic formations and explore how meaning signification proceeds through clustering and the use of productive chains of signifiers that ultimately propel the text of *Arctic Circle* to a structural instability. *The research was conducted during the artist’s residency at the Onassis Labs in Athens.*

Ilan Manouach

Conceptual comics artist and
researcher,
Aalto University.





Ilan Manouach: Shapereader (2014). Copyrights courtesy of the artist.

Ilan Manouach is a conceptual comics artist. He currently pursues a PhD at Aalto University in Helsinki (adv. Craig Dworkin) where he examines how the comics industry is undergoing historic mutations in the midst of increasingly financialized, globalized technological affordances of the XXIst century. He is mostly known for being the creator of *Shapereader*, an embodied system of communication designed for blind and partially sighted readers/makers of comics.

Cover photo: Sonia Soberats and Mark Andres: *Portrait in Paper* (2009).
Seeing With Photography Collective. Copyrights courtesy of the artists.

